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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 VILNIUS 001272

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: LITHUANIA'S WORK AND TRAVEL PROGRAM

REF: Vilnius 1226

1. Summary. Lithuania's Summer Work and Travel Program (SWT), one of the largest programs per capita in the world, sends 2,000 university students to more than 30 states each year. Concentrated primarily in service-oriented positions in tourist areas along the East Coast and Great Lakes, Lithuanians participate in the program to improve language skills, learn about American culture, and earn money for their university studies. The 97 percent return rate in 2005 reflects strong Post oversight, including regular meetings with organizers. Alumni respondents to a post-generated survey tell us they return to Lithuania more confident, self-sufficient, and appreciative of the cultural diversity and natural beauty of the United States. Respondents affirm that the program fosters very pro-American attitudes among Lithuania's future leaders. End Summary.

Lithuania's Work and Travel Program

2. More than 7,200 Lithuanian university students participated in the SWT between 2003-2005. Students from Lithuania's most prestigious 14 institutions of higher learning participate in the program. Utilizing the databases of the program's ten Lithuania-based organizers as well as recommendations from alumni, participants flock to service-oriented positions in traditional tourist areas along the East Coast, Great Lakes, and Alaska. Though most participants receive hourly remuneration above minimum wage, wages for workers range from \$2.00-\$3.00 per hour plus gratuities for wait staff and hostesses to \$10.00-\$12.00 for those working in more physically demanding jobs such as construction, moving, and housekeeping.

Strong Post Oversight

3. Post maintains strong control and active oversight over the program by assigning a Vice Consul and senior LES to directly manage SWT. Consular officers regularly meet with the ten local recruiting agencies, as well as with American host organizations. Post conducts a general meeting involving all local agencies early in the recruitment cycle to clearly identify program requirements and detail the processing of SWT applicants to ensure they do not interfere with normal NIV traffic. Local agencies have impressively demonstrated that they do a better job of reporting overstays than traditional Post-generated validation studies. Post, however, continues to regularly spot-check the veracity of these numbers. Post conducts a comprehensive review of the program and its constituent recruitment and source organizations at the end of each program year. Agencies whose return rates fall below 85 percent risk being removed or suspended from the program. Universities who likewise represent a cluster of non-returnees are dropped from the program. Post has removed one agency and two universities, and suspended a second agency for two years for poor performance since 2002. Aggregate statistics for the years 2003-2005 indicate that 92 percent of the more than 7,200 participants returned on time following their program. Return rates for the 2005 program were 96.5 percent. Most overstays change their status to that of a student (F1) or temporary worker (H2B). One student who traveled to Maine as part of the 2003 program told us that his employer "invited" him to remain in the U.S. after the program to manage a gas station.

Promoting the Program, Study, and Visa Waiver Roadmap

4. Post actively promotes SWT as part of its broader Visa Waiver Roadmap outreach campaign to Lithuania's public (reftel A). A common claim and criticism in Lithuania of America's immigration law is that young adults are denied nonimmigrant visas at rates disproportionate to the general public. Regular speaking engagements by both Consular and Public Diplomacy officers highlighting SWT and the myriad of opportunities for students to travel legally to the U.S.

helps mollify these erroneous complaints. During a roundtable discussion at Lithuania's parliament regarding America's visa policy, for example, the Consul noted that thousands of students each year receive visas for SWT. (More than 12,000 Lithuanian students participated in SWT between 2000-2005.). The Vice Consul manager of the program recently spoke about study opportunities in America, the visa process, and SWT to more than 100 students at the Embassy's American Center.

The Program: In Participants' Own Words

15. To better understand Lithuania's SWT program and its impact through the eyes of the participants, Post created and distributed a questionnaire to 5,000 alumni from the 2003-2005 programs. Through their responses to the questionnaire's eight questions, nearly 350 alumni detailed their experiences and the impact and utility of the SWT program. Students told us that the primary reasons they participated in the program were to improve language abilities, satiate a sense of adventure and wonder about America, and earn money for their studies. Most came away impressed with the customer-service orientation and friendly nature of Americans. Noting that Lithuania is one of the most homogenous nations in the world, several highlighted the cultural diversity of America and the sensitivity most Americans showed each other.

"The Best Experience of My Life"

16. Though Lithuanians generally found Americans lacking in knowledge about the rest of the world, they characterized Americans as a patriotic, smiling group who enjoyed their "super-sized" lifestyle. Most participants traveled during their summer, with Niagara Falls, Boston, and New York City the most popular destinations, though some said they traveled as far as the Bahamas, Hawaii and Mexico. Respondents noted that their best experiences included halibut fishing in Alaska, a professional football game in Buffalo, NY, seeing the skyscrapers of New York City, visiting New Orleans jazz clubs, meeting Bette Midler and Luciano Pavarotti in Connecticut, and, from a computer science major, having the opportunity to eat lunch on the "Google" campus. Some participants, however, particularly those that worked two jobs to maximize their earning potential, did not venture beyond their state of residence. These students remark that this decision afforded them the opportunity to become more economically self-sufficient following their return. Others noted that they spent a sizable portion of their income in the U.S. on things like computer equipment and corrective laser eye surgery, something not available in Lithuania.

Program Benefits to Participants

17. The impact of the program is, in the participants' own words, profound. Students noted that their American experiences made them more polite, confident, and self-sufficient. Most immediately applied their improved language skills to their benefit at school, noting higher grades, particularly in fields such as law and international relations where course texts are in English. Others, noting that the experience reinforced the value of a university education, cited improved TOEFL scores and a desire to continue their education abroad, including in the United States. One student, majoring in psychology at Vytautas Magnus University, utilized her travel window following the program to explore U.S. educational opportunities. She later returned to the United States on a student visa and will graduate this summer from Pennsylvania State University with a degree in industrial/organizational psychology, a specialty not taught in Lithuania, and will return to Lithuania. Several alumni told us the program helped give them the language skills to secure placement in graduate programs in Europe, such as Kaiserslautern University of Technology (Germany) and Concordia International University (Estonia), and at the University of Dortmund (Germany) as an Erasmus scholar, as well as employment following graduation in the fields of biochemistry and international finance in England. One student said her experience at a special needs camp in Illinois will make her a better doctor by sensitizing her to the needs of the disabled. She noted that she hoped to apply some of the treatment and mainstreaming techniques learned in the United States to Lithuania.

Long-Term Impact of Program

18. Respondents universally affirm that the program gave them a distinct advantage over other graduates when seeking employment. Respondents note that Lithuanian employers greatly value their American experience, particularly their exposure to a multinational culture, language skills, and familiarity with American corporate culture and management styles. Recent program alumni, for example, have secured leadership positions in both governmental and private institutions, such as the chief legal specialist for the Vilnius city administration, and a consultant in an international management-consulting firm. Many alumni have qualified for full-validity tourist visas shortly after graduation.

Comment

19. The continued efficacy of the Work and Travel Program will remain one of Post's most important objectives. Competition from EU-funded programs and work opportunities elsewhere in Europe has begun to affect the numbers of Lithuanian students participating in SWT. By continuing to work closely with both local and American-based program organizers, and promoting the program through public speaking events, Post hopes to continue to reduce the incidence of visa overstays while increasing program participation. That alumni had overwhelmingly positive experiences during their formative years leads us to believe that the program is cultivating a pro-American attitude among many of Lithuania's future leaders.